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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the theory and implementation guidelines of a visual arts curriculum for emotionally handicapped adolescents. The author stresses the importance of expressive arts and of identification with the art experience, and suggests that a curriculum should start with themes, experiences, and ideas worth communicating. Expressive artists and emotionally disturbed children are seen to share such characteristics as excessive motor activity, day dreaming, fantasizing, and impulsiveness. (CL)

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VISUAL ARTS FOR EMOTIONALLY HANDICAPPED EARLY ADOLESCENTS

THEORY AND RESULTANT GUIDELINES

paper presented by

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at

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The program in affective education which is being reported on today is an exciting one, if for no other reason than it is one of those rare efforts in education to try and take knowledge gained from psychiatric experiences and from typical school settings, merging them to form the basis for a curriculum for emotionally handicapped adolescents. I have been mostly an interested observer of the program and in a very limited way an advisor. Rather than report the visual art aspect of the program which I feel you can examine by reading the well organized guide, I have chosen to discuss a theory and state some guidelines for developing an art curriculum for the emotionally handicapped.

I will confine my comments to three broad areas. First, let me start by sharing with you my reaction to a few key words I find in curriculum plans for the art instruction for the special child. Then, let me share with you several observations about art, artists and instruction in art. Finally, let me try and provide some guidelines on which a meaningful alternative curriculum in art can be formulated.

As I read art curriculum guides and articles on art education for special children I have found that certain words used in those guides conjure up strange meanings in my mind. I wonder if what is said reflects the thinking about what art is and what making art means. I am sharing my thought on a few of these words to get you to challenge the printed word - to think of meaning. Think of meaning from varied vantage points,

my vantage point is that of an artist and that of a child that never quite fit a mold, behaviorly disordered, maybe. The words that come to mind are adoptive, adaptive, appropriate, interpretation, ideas and oh, yes, remedial.

Adoptive instruction or adaptive instruction for special learners must mean that I, the special learner, will be getting some hand-me-down instruction. My teacher is adopting someone else's lessons. I must not be deserving of my own original instruction or since the word adapt is used maybe I'm inferior and not able to do what other children can do. If my teacher adopts something someone else could do and then adapts it so I can do it I'll think I'm normal and normal is what the teacher wants me to be.

Another word that has puzzled me is appropriate expression, through art children learn to appropriately express themselves. Why the word appropriate, it must mean someone already knows what it is I have to say or at least how I should say it. I always thought artists painted what they wanted to just the way they wanted. The concept that my expression in art must be appropriate means it must be according to some rules, I can not express myself, share my experiences; I must appropriately express myself, whatever that means.

Then I read, let the child interpret their feelings, the idea of interpretation is strange, why can't I just give form to my feelings, that is what an artist is allowed to do. Must the feelings be interpreted appropriately? (Just a fleeting thought) At the same time I read the art program should help the child have ideas, develop ideas and express ideas. Do you really suppose I, the child, can have any idea I want? Or, is

someone, the teacher, going to say that the idea isn't appropriate.

Leo Tolstoy said, "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to other feelings he has lived through and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them." 1

This brings me to one last word, it is remedial. A remedial art program, how can art ever be remedial or an art program remedial if art is as defined by Tolstoy. If I share my experiences the very best I can through my art it can't be remedial, or is there an appropriate way, a schedule I should be on, I wonder.

Words like these, if used in art curriculums, and they are used, tell me, the artist, that the writers of those curriculums were not interested in children being artists and creating real art at least not expressive art. I get the feeling that they are more concerned about the childs' external behaviors and conforming to accepted standards of the day. These are reasonable concerns only they contradict art and may well take away the value of art for the child. As a child those words, when found in my curriculum, label me as different, as not to be trusted, as one that must change and conform if I'm to be thought of as normal.

The words used in a curriculum reflect the philosophy on which that curriculum is based and I feel art curriculums for all children need to be based on a deep understanding of art, the artist and the making of art and how this relates to and effects the human being, at this time primarily the emotionally disturbed human being.

The art I want us to think about is expressive art, not utilitarian art as it is in the expressive art that has as its major outcome that of the

sharing of experiences and feelings by the artist. It is art as defined by Tolstoy. It is this sharing of experiences and feelings that provides the release of emotions, the mirror into which the artist looks to examine his world and his relationship to the world. It is this very act that can be so valuable to the person creating the art.

"It seems obvious that the creation of the artistic form is attuned to a specific mental state of the creator. In other words, as there is an interconnection between the formative processes and the psychophysical responses of the originator, it can be said that he who forms artistically, in turn forms himself." 2

Since it is the emotionally disturbed, we as educators, are most concerned about here today, it is through an expressive art experience and its resultant product that the child and the teacher comes to grips with issues of meaning.

"Furthermore, since each artistically formed thing reveals the order and balance that its maker has given it, we may also say that things artistically created have a formative effect upon their surroundings."3

It has been through the process or creating, of expressing themselves that men, of the past and the present have been able to cope with themselves and their world.

I am suggesting by defining expressive art, that in a way art has been therapy for many for centuries. I would like also to suggest that creative people, expressive artists, are emotionally disturbed at least to a degree and that this condition of emotional disturbance is a key factor in their art work and that their art work is a key factor in their

survival in the world, possibly what kept them out of institutions.

A definition of creative people, expressive artists in this case, that I have liked is the following, ''The creative person is both more primative and more cultured, more destructive and more constructive, crazier and saner, than the average person''. 4 Think about it for a moment, isn't the emotionally disturbed close to this definition. It is the simularities between artists, some artists, and the person labeled emotionally disturbed and between the value of making expressive art to the artist and to the child that I'm trying to suggest. Artists, the expressive artists, have never been considered normal and their art work has always had to struggle for acceptance. This has been the pattern throughout history. DaVinci, didn't complete all his assigned tasks, he drew about things that couldn't possibly work and he violated the law to study the human body structure. Rembrandts best works are not those that conformed to the values of the day but those that grew out of his troubled, tormented soul and mind.when it seemed the world was against him. Van Gogh, you might say, was even crazy and his arting was possibly his only real way to deal with reality as he saw it.

The point I'm after is that having feelings, ideas, and seeing the world and yourself definitely is characteristic of the creative artist and that dealing with feelings, ideas and seeing the world and yourself in a healthy, positive way is a need of the emotionally disturbed. If making art has provided an outlet for artists, why won't it for the emotionally disturbed?

The art process needs also to be mentioned for it is here that maybe

the biggest problem arises. I want to suggest that if we teach people how to make art we run the risk of limiting their ability to make art. As for the teaching of aesthetic principles, it should be remembered that the rules grew out of the analysis of works of art; no work of art was ever achieved by learning the principles of design and then applying them. Young children act without regard for the amount of knowledge mankind has already amassed and artists have confidence that what little they know is enough to get the job done. There is little evidence that a lot of schooling in rules of how to make art has helped produce quality expressive art. To create constantly with the knowledge possessed is the best preparation for future creative action.

I am not putting down knowledge of art elements and art history, all I am saying is they are not prerequisites for making art. It may well be that the most important thing is the ability to incorporate oneself into the arting actively as no art expression is possible without self-identification with the experience being expressed as well as the art materials by which it is being expressed.

The artistic process may call for some knowledge of art media and some awareness of what is called design if we are to give form to our feelings. But, far more important is that the artistic process calls on the widest range of human capacities. Like maturation in general, it demands the integration of many inescapably, conflicting elements, among them impulse and control, aggression and love, feeling and thinking, fantasy and reality, the unconscious and the conscious. The goal of

our art programs should be to make available to the individual resources within himself and outside himself and to have art serve as an acceptable place, as a meeting grounds for the inner and outer worlds. 5

Alternative curriculums, for emotionally disturbed children should take their form against and based on what I have just been discussing. I feel the opportunity to come to grips with life, return to normalacy or accept your abnormalacy in a workable way could for some children lie in the act of arting, making art, giving visual expression to their worlds and experiences in those worlds.

Some people fear that young people today have experenced much vicariously by television and almost nothing by direct, self-initiated experiences. 6 The art program must start with experiences, identifying those which are common to many, those which are unique to only one and provide when ever possible new reinforcing experiences for it is this interaction with the world and the recall of the past that is the basis for creative, expressive art production. It is also the mirror into which one looks when responding and valuing expressive art created by others. The artist responds to his world and the child must do likewise.

If we accept that there is no such thing as appropriate expression nor is there any such thing as remedial art instruction or expression and that anyone can make art, give expression, with whatever knowledge and skill they possess then our art program planning begins with knowing the experiences of the children using them or creating new experience for the children. Art is saying things much more than making things, and the value to the child is in the process not the product.

Prinzhorn, in working with some schizophrenic persons, felt that pictorial creative power was present in every person. His attention as a scientific observor was not so much turned to the interpretation of the content of their drawings and paintings but to underlying expressive tendencies. These tendencies include: an urge to play, an ornamental urge, a tendency to order and a need to elaborate meaningful symbols. He further felt that art needed to be as spontaneous as possible, this is a real challenge for the teacher, to make spontaneous art happen. 7

Others share this position that every human has a spark of human spirit, a need to express themselves. In deed it is not easy to free all young people from their restrictions but this is one thing all teachers should be able to do, provide adequate motivations so expression will take place. The question arises as to the kind of motivation needed, and it should be noted that Lowenfeld and others have said; that motivation for emotionally disturbed differs only in degree and intensity and not in kind. The more the individual relates himself to the creative process the greater is the probability of positive change in the person creating the art.

Art materials and media are not unimportant for it is with them art is given visible form. What is important is how they are taught and based on what I have already pointed out the instruction in art media must be subordinated to expression of ideas. The spontaneous development of art skills and knowledge is always welcomed and should be rewarded but communication, expressive art, is the goal. It is wrong headed to concentrate on the mindless imitation of brush strokes, textures in clay, color wheels,

etc. when expression can take place without any set amount of such skill and knowledge. An art curriculum then should include instruction in an art media only at the time a child need it to maximize his expressive art.

The alternative curriculum, I am suggesting, starts with themes, experiences, things worth communicating. The teachers should use these for a springboard to motivate the art experence. The curriculum uses any art media that will make it easy to express the ideas, express them in a rich, meaningful way. All experiences and any media should be acceptable.

The actual creating, the work time, and the childs' behavior needs to be approached openly. Remember, artists, expressive artists, just may have some characteristics in common with children labeled emotionally disturbed and it is an awareness of this and taking them into account that could make a difference. First, there is excessive motor activity and this will require as much physical work space and as long a period of time as needed. Second, daydreaming and fantasizing is common, sometimes about unrelated things and this needs to be utilized as basis for some art work as an acceptable way of getting ideas. A third symptom found in both is impulsiveness, very spontaneous, this needs not to be corrected but channeled into a drive to share an idea and the freedom to be this way. Sometimes things don't go right and it makes for irritability, dissatisfaction with oneself and everyone around them, accept this and use it to heighten the expressive quality, for it is this dissatisfaction coupled with an agressiveness, an urge to create that causes new ideas and growth to take place. This theory for an alternative curriculum in art stresses the primary importance of unadulterated creative process.

Not the separate teaching of artistic elements of form according to the academic methods, not a special technique employed in a special medium, neither drawing, painting, sculpture, nor fine or applied art, is the final aim of the kind of art instruction proposed. The goal is rather the natural cultivation of changing and growing, mental and emotional powers as they operate simultaneously and interfunctionally within the process of artistic configuration.

I feel some very significant things have been done in clinical settings by a few sensitive people, most of the time working one on one with a patient. Our challenge is to take it out of the clinic and into the classroom.

This will not be done by packaging lesson plans and projects for teachers. Rather, the teachers, as the core of the Nebraska group did, must internalize a philosophy which values all of mankind, develop a sensitivity towards all of life and personally experience the act of making art on a genuinely expressive level. Then, and only then, will guides and lesson plans from a project like the arts project in Nebraska be of value to teachers as a guide in developing the instructional materials for their classrooms, personalized alternative curriculums.

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